DAWN

OPINION

Going nowhere

EFFORTS to find a permanent solution to differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan's Taliban regime are locked in a frustrating cycle with no foreseeable solution on the horizon. The main reason for this is the Taliban's obduracy, and lack of intention in stopping terrorist groups such as the TTP from staging cross-border attacks. The third round of talks in Istanbul wrapped up without any forward movement on Friday, with the extension of the ceasefire agreed to in Doha after hostilities last month as the only saving grace. Pakistan, indicating its seriousness, sent high-powered negotiators, including the ISI chief. But the Taliban's refusal to budge from their stance, as in previous rounds of dialogue, resulted in no progress. As the defence minister put it, the talks are currently in an "indefinite phase", though there are chances that further parleys are possible.

The Taliban have described Pakistan's demands as "unrealistic". But there is nothing undoable about preventing militant groups active on Afghan soil from attacking Pakistan. The Kabul regime has vacillated between denying that any terrorist groups are active in Afghanistan, and saying that internal security is Pakistan's own problem. While internal security is indeed Pakistan's responsibility, Kabul has a duty to stop armed actors from crossing the border and carrying out acts of terrorism in this country. Complicating matters further is the fact that Kabul is unwilling to give written guarantees that it will prevent attacks.

This recurring cycle of negotiations, followed by a breakdown in talks and the threat of renewed hostility, must end; a permanent solution needs to be found soon. Few in the international community will believe the Taliban when they claim that no TTP fighters, or militants belonging to other groups, are active on Afghan soil. Evidence proving the presence of such groups in Afghanistan is significant. The Taliban's ideological affinity with the TTP is also no secret. If the Afghan Taliban seek international recognition, they must realise that this will elude them unless they muzzle their militant comrades, and stop them from attacking sovereign states. The international community should ignore the threat of Afghanistan-based militants at its own peril. Today, these elements are attacking Pakistan; tomorrow, they may expand their reach to other states. Therefore, if the Taliban are not willing to accept Pakistan's legitimate demands, Islamabad should work with regional allies to ensure that the Kabul regime incurs costs for hosting terrorist groups. This can include limiting diplomatic engagement and trade ties. Pakistan must also be wary of Indian moves to indulge the Taliban. New Delhi has suddenly expressed great affinity for the Taliban — not out of any newfound love for the Afghan people, but to spite Pakistan. Islamabad, therefore, must not let hostile actors create further trouble on the western border.

Fragile future

INTERNATIONAL lenders have sounded the alarm about Pakistan's growing climate fragility. At the closing plenary of the Sustainable Development Conference, the World Bank and IMF warned that unchecked population growth, environmental degradation and depleting natural resources are pushing Pakistan towards a perilous tipping point. World Bank country director Dr Bolormaa Amgabazar noted that Pakistan's exposure to climate shocks and pollution has reached "alarmingly high" levels. The bank's *Climate and Country Development Report* projects a staggering 20-30pc decline in GDP by 2050 if current trends continue. That projection is not a far-off worry; its effects are already being felt. Repeated floods and droughts are eroding food security, livelihoods, and public health. Such economic pressures could deepen inequality and trigger social unrest, especially in already fragile regions.

The IMF's country representative, Mahir Binici, linked climate resilience directly to reform, saying Pakistan's $1.4bn Resilience and Sustainability Facility will help integrate climate considerations into fiscal planning. Future development spending, he added, will undergo climate screening — a welcome shift towards accountability in infrastructure decisions. Yet, while such conditionalities may strengthen governance, they also underline a double burden: Pakistan must reform and adapt simultaneously, even as international support remains painfully slow. Only recently, this paper highlighted how the Loss and Damage Fund — meant to provide rapid relief to vulnerable countries — has yet to disburse a single dollar. That fund, alongside the promised $20bn Country Partnership Framework from the World Bank, could anchor long-term adaptation if realised promptly. Unless these pledges translate into predictable, multi-year financing, the reform agenda will stand on shaky ground. What once seemed a looming threat has become Pakistan's everyday reality. The smog-filled skies, water scarcity and crippling floods that define Pakistan's seasons are symptoms of a deepening crisis that cuts across health, agriculture and energy. The government must integrate climate resilience into every tier of planning — from PSDP priorities to urban regulation — and global partners must match rhetoric with resources. Provinces too must align local development plans with climate goals to ensure results on the ground. Above all, climate policies must outlast political cycles. Only sustained commitment can protect the vulnerable and secure our economic, social, and environmental future for generations ahead. We cannot afford to treat climate warnings as background noise any longer.

Femicide nation

HOSTILE behaviour — sexual abuse, rape, acid attacks, 'honour' killings and more — torment women relentlessly, placing Pakistan among the most dangerous countries for females. The alarming data presented by the human rights minister last week exposes the entrenched control of misogynistic power structures that prevent safety and equity in the country. Between 2021 to 2024, over 7,500 women were murdered; 1,553 were killed for 'honour'. The National Police Bureau figures are dark — 17,771 reported cases of rape and gang-rape, 121 custodial sexual assaults, 9,799 domestic violence cases, 89,599 kidnappings, and 632 incidents of sexual harassment at workplaces in the four-year period. These amount to 173,367 incidents of violence against women logged in the country. The annual rise — 30,757 cases registered in 2021, 35,477 in 2022, 46,036 in 2023 and 61,997 in 2024 — is a bucket of cold water over the government's lofty and obviously fallacious claims about instituting preventive measures.

The state's failure to end impunity has rendered pro-women legislation, framed to curb excesses and protect women's bodily autonomy, ineffective as a deterrent. While violence against women escalates amid socioeconomic distress, psychological, physical, social and reproductive health is adversely affected. This is why pro-victim and survivor response, coupled with comprehensive preventive strategies to raise the low conviction rates, are crucial. We cannot afford to continue with predominantly reactive measures for the most pervasive human rights violations. Unless Pakistan places preventive measures at the centre of its criminal justice policy, it will remain a long way off from eradicating abuse against women. Women politicians and rights activists must agitate for women's safety and the law's implementation, alongside raising awareness in conservative areas to ensure that crimes are reported and their consequences known. In a society where a rape occurs every two minutes, only justice can guarantee respect for women.

BY MALEEHA LODHI

Slide into authoritarianism

The 27th constitutional amendment is part of the broader trend towards democratic backsliding.

PAKISTAN'S slide into authoritarianism has been unmistakable over the past three years or more. Now a fresh move will reinforce the trend of democratic regression. The 27th constitutional amendment tabled in parliament will alter the country's judicial structure with significant implications for governance and democracy.

Last year when parliament adopted the 26th Constitutional Amendment it was done in the darkness of night, without providing the final text to lawmakers before being tabled. The entire legislative process lacked transparency and was over in hours in parliament. Official coercion to secure the required two-thirds vote robbed the process of legitimacy. But the controversial amendment passed, making the judiciary subservient to the executive and undermining the rule of law. Consequently, the government won every case concerning constitutional interpretations.

The proposed 27th constitutional amendment seems to follow a similar path. It was kept under wraps until PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari disclosed the government had sought his party's support and revealed the amendment's key elements. This set off a public furore with constitutional lawyers calling this 'state capture of the judiciary', opposition leaders dubbing it as a 'power grab' directed by the establishment and others deeming it as a 'threat to democracy' and 'assault on the notion of separating justice from politics'.

As presented in the Senate, the 27th amendment consists of the following core elements. Establishment of a federal constitutional court, transfer of high court judges between courts and changes to Article 243 which concerns the control and command of the armed forces.

Establishment of a federal constitutional court was also attempted by the government in the 26th Amendment. But due to fierce opposition, constitutional benches were instead set up in the Supreme Court and high courts. That too was criticised because the composition of benches, influenced by the executive, empowered the government to choose which judges could hear constitutional cases of concern. It all but took away that jurisdiction from regular benches.

Objections to a constitutional court rest on solid ground. Packed with judges chosen by the government it will set up a parallel executive-compliant court. This will denude the Supreme Court of its jurisdiction in constitutional cases and those relating to fundamental rights. Meanwhile the proposal to transfer high court judges between courts, without their consent, will mean the executive will be able to sideline 'independent judges' through its influence on the judicial commission, empowered to do this.

Originally the proposed amendment also included rollback of constitutional safeguards for provincial shares in state revenues determined by the National Finance Commission Award, which guarantees they are not reduced. While the fiscal logic for this was understandable as the federal government is left with limited resources to meet its expenditure, the PPP opposed this as unacceptable erosion of the 18th Amendment. This was then dropped from the amendment but with ministers indicating it might be taken up later.

Modification of Article 243 of the Constitution, which gives the government control and command of the armed forces, is predicated on the argument that defence needs have changed as a result of modern warfare while the post of field marshal necessitates constitutional recognition. The amendment bestows wider constitutionally sanctioned powers and privileges to the top military leadership. The office of Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (headed at different times by the army, air force and naval officers who were supposed to do so by rotation) is to be abolished. Instead, the new post of Chief of Defence Forces will be created, to be held by the army chief. The Field Marshal, Marshal of the Air Force and Admiral of the Fleet are all given legal immunity akin to the president's and can only be removed by impeachment. They will remain in uniform and retain the rank for life with the same privileges and immunity. The effect of all this is to further shift the power balance to the military from the civilian system.

Seen in the context of democratic erosion in recent years, the 27th amendment delivers another blow to democracy by further emasculating an independent judiciary. There have been a series of democratic reversals under the hybrid government-plus arrangement. Every indicator of democracy has shown regression. Parliament has been reduced to a rubber-stamp, freedom of assembly restricted, opposition suppressed, media controlled, independence of the judiciary compromised and the civil-military balance skewed to the latter's advantage by a ruling coalition happy to act as a subservient junior 'partner'.

It can be argued that democratic backsliding is nothing new and similar to what happened in the past. Previous periods of civilian rule also saw governments take repressive measures — crackdowns on opposition, jailing of opposition leaders on trumped-up charges, marginalisation of parliament, muzzling the media and undermining judicial independence.

While the present situation has echoes of the past, the nature and extent of democratic erosion makes it different. Previous civilian governments would persecute political opponents and take other autocratic measures including eroding judicial independence and controlling the media, but they would do so mostly on their own without the establishment's direct involvement. That changed after 2018 and more so after 2022. The establishment became directly involved in efforts to 'control' the opposition, courts, media and digital space. This expanded its sphere of political interventions in an unprecedented way. Perhaps what 'necessitated' this was that the government installed after the 2024 election had little political weight as it rested on a dubious mandate. So, it needed to be shored up.

Past periods of civilian democracy did not see continuous bans on political protests and public assembly as happens now. Moreover, targeting of political opponents is now accompanied by efforts at broader repression. Raids on opposition leaders' homes and incommunicado detention of party activists are part of the present government's inventory of repressive actions. Because there is more to control, the government has gone much further than its civilian predecessors in micromanaging the electronic media and imposing curbs on digital space.

Against this backdrop the 27th constitutional amendment is part of a broader pattern of Pakistan's slide to an undemocratic system. But as the country's history shows, aggrandisement of power and manipulation of law neither makes a government secure nor guarantees its future. It only exposes its lack of self-confidence and absence of faith in democracy. ■

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.

BY UMAIR JAVED

Preserving the past

OVER the last 15-odd years, ways in which history is perceived by the Pakistani state in its official posture as well as the public at large is undergoing some change. The content of this change is not certain, nor is its direction necessarily set in stone. But what is clear is that there is some rethinking of history, memory, and culture taking place.

What does this rethinking mean as far as the state is concerned? A good example comes from the content of the Pakistan pavilion at the Dubai World Expo from a few years ago. We can take that content as the version that the state wishes to show to the world outside. It was decisively more syncretic and multicultural, more accommodative and reflective of ethnic difference, than standard two-nation theory nationalism. It also went a considerable way in grounding the idea of Pakistan in its actual geography, by drawing links to the various riverine civilisations that occupied these lands over several millennia, regardless of their religious affiliation.

One should be wary of reading too much into an external projection, given how the state in many ways continues to deny ethnic and religious difference and suppress history through its practice. But it's hard to ignore that a variety of different factors have partially compelled a mild rethink of the usual religion-inflected, homogenising idea of what this country really is and what constitutes its past.

Such factors include the rise of anti-state Islamist radicalism, the rise of aggressive Hindutva nationalism next door, and a change in the character of the state elite into a somewhat more multiethnic coalition. Several decades of territorial integrity, post-1971, and entrenchment of national belonging in the 'core' provinces, has also opened space for some experimentation on a firmer footing.

None of this, though, stands in ignorance of the general hypocrisy of the state: talking about tolerance, while emboldening bigots; restoring heritage sites, while ignoring the desecration of minority places of worship in the present. These contradictions continue to exist and should be called out loudly and categorically.

What is more interesting and generative of optimism is a reimagination of the past taking place within society, well beyond formal state patronage or guidance. Digital platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram provide space for cultural enthusiasts and pop-historians of all stripes (and, admittedly, quality). Their output usually takes the form of short-form video essays or photographs that provide narrations about physical heritage and the myriad cultural practices — religious ritual, food, music etc — that exist in Pakistan today.

Some of these outlets have crossed the digital divide and taken on offline forms. Curated walking trips in urban and peri-urban locations, heritage and nature tourism, and even culinary adventures showcasing regional cuisines, are increasingly available to urban audiences. While their small scale is not indicative of anything major or substantial yet, these developments do provide insight into how the public's relationship to the past is neither homogenous nor settled. And it is certainly not a wholesale acceptance of what the state may have intended.

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One such cultural endeavour that recently drew my attention is the work of historian and writer, Syed Faizan Abbas Naqvi in Lahore. A self-declared urban enthusiast, afflicted with what he calls "*marz-i-Lahore*" (an obsession of the city bordering on ailment), Faizan runs various digital outlets showcasing his adventures at various less-known, ignored, or undiscovered historical sites in and around the city.

His work involves finding bits of history all over, in places remote, such as the border villages to the east, and as mundane as parking lots, housing complexes, and markets. Through these journeys of discovery (as '*Lahore ka khoji*'), Faizan casts light on 135 different historical sites, over and above the usual grand Mughal and British-era buildings that most casual observers and residents of the city are familiar with.

This insurgent history has made its way into published form, with 100 sites now being commemorated and archived in his recently released book, *Exploring Lahore*, that covers pretty much the entire span of religio-cultural diversity that the city has experienced these past few centuries. For those interested in supporting such valuable work, the book is available through the author's Facebook and Instagram pages.

Such work is important for several reasons. The first is that far too many sites of historical and cultural significance, especially those representing minority traditions, lie in dilapidated and unprotected shape. Appreciable restoration work in a few locations by WCLA notwithstanding, many sites are already lost or damaged beyond any recovery. In the course of his own documentation, Faizan identified a few sites — including a Mughal-era graveyard — that was lost to commercial development just in the past few years. Recording and archiving their existence takes on great importance in a context where their continued physical existence remains uncertain.

Another reason why such interventions are important is because they allow for creative ways in which the past can be recovered and reimagined.

Independence came with partition and the wholesale transfer of population to and from the region that became Pakistan. Partly down to the religion-inspired nature of politics, and partly because of physical dislocation, many citizens have spent their lives in an ahistorical state. The city only exists in their present, the past becomes another country.

The process of recovering the past then is also a process of making people historically aware. It is to recognise that their present is a form of shared continuity, not an insulated break. Taken to one of its logical ends, this historical grounding and appreciation can even have the appreciable and much-needed impact of making people more accommodating and tolerant of difference in the present. ■

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